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Lucien Bianco, Les Origines de la révolution chinoise 1915-1949

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1 It is rare that a first work of synthesis on a period close to contemporary history survives the test of historical review that comes with the passage of time, the release of archives, and the accounts of witnesses who begin to find voice. The ability of Lucien Bianco's work to stand the test of time is all the more remarkable given that it was initially researched in 1966 and published in 1967 (in English in 1971),[1] when China was in the throes of the Cultural Revolution, and that it was attempting to delineate the "origins" of a revolution that was far from completed. Three previous editions have already shown the historian's clear-sightedness. The latest thoroughly reworked version successfully takes into account the considerable development of historiography on the period while remaining steadfast to its own core interpretative lines. The successive restatements that Bianco tends to offer once a decade, and which are not "pasted up," as it were, allow the reader the pleasure of finding, for instance, the obituary of Mao Zedong as it appeared in Le Monde in September 1976 or the initial lines of the original preface.[2] At the same time, it is equally rare for a historian to undertake such an exhaustive updating, the more remarkable as it has been "filtered" by citing only works that convey truly new elements (the amount of reading this must have required can only be conjectured). The bibliography thus remains a valuable tool, although the disappearance of some of the comments that accompanied the titles in previous editions may be missed (some are retained in the notes).[3] The addition of an index is most welcome, but the work would have further benefited from a detailed chronology as a guide to events for the student or non-specialist.

2 The study remains faithful to the first edition's aim of being a synthesis that can help a neophyte become familiar with the pivotal people and events of contemporary Chinese history, and at the same time offer an overarching interpretation that, based on precise — even erudite—references, can be grist to specialist mills. As for interpretation, this book in fact contains two. As Bianco says in his new postscript, the work was born out of a sense of dissatisfaction with the dominant paradigm in American Sinology (to

which he acknowledges he “owes everything") of “China’s response to the West." He therefore tried, well before the proponents of a “China-centred" approach (Paul Cohen), to look for the “social causes" and endogenous dynamics of the Chinese revolution (p. 320). As he notes, this focus on “peasant misery" is not entirely consistent with the statement that nationalism, especially its anti-imperialist variant, represents the essential ferment of the Chinese revolution throughout the twentieth century. He articulates these two ideas in the following way at the end of the postscript:

3 Today, these two phenomena seem to me to have different origins. In itself, peasant misery posed the most important, serious, and massive question [...] As for motivations, it was not this misery but national humiliation that turned so many young intellectuals towards revolution, and which they carried out by instrumentalising the masses. It is this that led me to hold the Chinese revolution to be essentially a nationalist revolution. (p. 320)

4 Whatever the exact hierarchy of causes, this conclusion has the merit of capturing the work’s inherent tension, which also more generally seeks to balance Annales-style methodology and the desire not to understate what specifically stems from politics (p. 313).

5 Also in the postscript, Bianco points to what he deems some major advances in historiography over the last few decades: relativisation of the May Fourth 1919 rupture, confirmation of the depths of peasant misery (although empirical studies disagree on whether it had been growing worse), and a better understanding of the Communist Party’s internal workings, notably its undeniable role in the mobilisation—by no means spontaneous—of peasants against the old order’s privileged elite. The body of the work sets out a number of points. In the first chapter, almost entirely rewritten with dozens of new footnotes, it is the 1839 rupture (before that of 1919) that is relativised. Underlining the importance of the empire’s latent crisis since the early nineteenth century on the one hand, and on the other hand, internal revolts of which the Taiping rebellion is only the best known, Bianco provides all the elements to revise the paradigm of “China’s response to the West" (although the Opium War remains the starting point of his narrative). In a similar vein, the 1911 Revolution is inscribed in a continuum of constitutional reforms ranging from the xinzheng provincial elections (p. 48) to the parliamentary election of 1912-13, “the most democratic experiment China has ever known" (p. 53).

6 It is on the May Fourth movement that historiographic revision is perhaps the most significant, although the 1987 edition had already relativised the theories of an iconoclastic break. The current edition nevertheless pays tribute to the rich new cultural history of the late Qing and early Republican periods (p. 307-309 and p. 498, notes 5 to 9), which traces the basic rupture to around 1900 while relativising the role of intellectuals and highlighting that of a larger urban sector. While it is easy to share Bianco’s scepticism towards some of the “demystifiers" of the New Culture movement, who see in it only intellectual factionalism and the struggle for appropriation of “cultural capital,"[4] it is regrettable that he does not mention the writings of intellectual historian Wang Hui (save for an article on Zhang Binglin). By stating that the patron saints of the May Fourth Movement were the critics of the Enlightenment (Nietzsche, Marx, and Darwin, and possibly Max Stirner), rather than its votaries (Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Adam Smith), Wang initiated a fullscale intellectual re-evaluation of

the movement. This led him to assert that its main demand (“democracy") primarily referred to the individual’s emancipation through, among others, a critique of “abstract" rationalisation or of the irenicism of Enlightenment philosophy. It is nineteenth rather than eighteenth century Europe that inspired a number of modernising Chinese intellectuals, and it is also in this period that the origins of their nationalism are to be sought.[5]

7 While new empirical studies do not greatly alter the picture of peasant misery, the “Nanjing decade" is subject to a profoundly new synthesis in Chapter 5. New studies on the Guomindang specify its intellectual and diplomatic links with Nazism (notably the example of the Lixingshe, p. 192), and update the analysis of its administrative and economic policy. Similarly, Bianco devotes a whole new passage (p. 211-219) to two rural educators, Liang Shuming and Jimmy Yan, whose Utopian projects illustrate the relative autonomy of civil society under the Republic despite the difficulties encountered. Their activities also show the durability of a rural Utopianism among Chinese intellectuals, cutting across different periods and political cleavages. As for the era of war and civil war, Bianco had already in the initial edition added nuance to Chalmers Johnson’s classical thesis: while acknowledging the major role of war in peasant enrolment on the Communist side, he argued for taking into account the fact that “the originality of the attitude displayed by the Red Army and Communist cadres was as much social as national in character" (p. 241). This statement is itself questioned by drawing on material from Chapter 17 of Bianco’s own extensive study of peasant revolts.[6] The gathering of peasants under the Communist banner was more often compulsory than spontaneous: “a tiny minority (mostly young people) by conviction, a larger minority out of interest, and the majority through submission. Naturally, it remains true that the Communists were much more preoccupied than their enemies with understanding the people, though perhaps with the aim all the better to manipulate them" (p. 242). It is only regrettable that the synthesis is too modest in its exploration of the author’s own first-hand research and its considerable implications.

8 The body of the text is followed by an essay entitled “The Chinese Revolution, an interpretation" (p. 323-411), revisiting the nationalist dimension of the revolution and analysing it from a viewpoint that extends to the emergence of Maoism. The above-mentioned interpretative inflexions, from the relativisation of the May Fourth iconoclasm to the Guomindang’s proto-fascist drift, are reworked as a prelude to an analysis of the national and social aspects of the revolution after 1949. The angle is perhaps overly systematic when the author groups intellectual elites, from Liang Qichao’s writings to the TV series Heshang (River Elegy, the airing of which preceded the Tiananmen student movement by a few months), under the “nationalist" label. That many intellectuals or artists situated their reflections in a national framework should not obscure the fact that these nationalisms did not coincide, and that they drew their legitimacy from different and often contradictory sources: “localism" (p. 48), such as that of Zhang Binglin (p. 331, note 6) cannot be subsumed under the “national" label in the same way as the anti-statist anarchism of Shifu (p. 333, note 11), the anti-Confucianism of Chen Duxiu (p. 82-83), or the neo-traditionalism of Chiang Kai-shek in the 1930s, even without going so far as the “cultural fever" of the 1980s or the fenqing (“angry youth") of the Olympic flame. Other voices also existed, pursuing other horizons: for example the writers Shen Congwen (for whom the local was not integrated into any pre-existing national) and Zhang Ailing (in whose writings the

nation dissolves into a cosmopolitan perspective), both of whom, it is interesting to note, became bestselling authors again after 1978.

9 In re-evaluating the revolution's social dimension, Bianco goes a step further in relation to the body of the book: he contends that "the Communists prevailed without obtaining the peasants' massive support" (p. 358), stressing that nationalism has always been largely limited to intellectual elites and that peasants, even during the war, shared the sentiment only partially. And if the CCP failed to rally the rural masses before 1949, the picture is bleaker still after the "Liberation." The historian's judgement, backed by figures and studies, is severe: the revolution created a "society of castes" (p. 364), and it was only after the downfall of the "egalitarian fervour" that the urban-rural gap was finally reduced. Mao himself "generally gave priority to revolutionary fervour to the detriment of elevating the masses' standard of living" (p. 369), denouncing inequalities more than he fought them, to the extent that "he lost on both counts: China remained poor and the Chinese people miserable" (p. 370). He concludes with the question of totalitarianism through a precise and convincing comparison with the Soviet "big brother': the Great Leap Forward is compared with the great Ukraine famine, and the Cultural Revolution with the Stalinist terror of the 1930s. For Bianco, while the Chinese famine took a great toll of lives, even as a percentage of the population, it resulted above all from the bureaucratic zeal in hiding it, while in the Soviet Union, "peasants were made to go hungry in a more deliberate fashion" (p. 398). Similarly, Bianco notes that while the Stalinist purges and the Cultural Revolution are comparable in terms of method and political aims, "unlike Stalin, Mao did not seek to definitively 'liquidate' anyone who crossed his path" (p. 402). Bianco does not go so far as to adopt the hypothesis of Simon Leys in The Chairman's New Clothes (which he does not cite) of the Cultural Revolution as a pure factional struggle devoid of any socio-ideological content, but writes that "Mao sincerely believed the revolution was threatened and wanted to do the impossible to prevent capitalist restoration. To this end (which again went beyond simply preserving his power) he was ready to kill countless people" (p. 401).

10 This book thus contains many answers to questions that continue to nag China specialists and non-specialists, and readers owe a further debt of gratitude to the empirical elements that enable the reader to work out his or her own responses. Especially on the central question of nationalism, the book does not conceal its internal tensions. One might have hoped that the successive historiographic revisions—the relativisation in Chapter 1 of the impact of the "unequal treaties"; the stress in Chapter 2 on the continuity between the intellectual debate of the late Qing and the May Fourth eras; and the radical revision in the last chapters of the classic thesis of Chalmers Johnson on the impact of the Japanese invasion—could have led to more audacious conclusions. Paul Cohen attempted, in a reflective work that is in many ways comparable to Bianco's conclusive essay, to move beyond the three dominant paradigms, "Western impact – Chinese response," "tradition – modernity," and "imperialism."[7] Many of Cohen's examples are to be found in Origins of the Chinese Revolution, notably those drawn from Cohen's own study of the Taiping. It is therefore regrettable that there is no overall discussion of Cohen's thesis, which Bianco implicitly opposes (p. 221 on imperialism and p. 298 on modernity/ tradition). Cohen had shown how the discourse on the West, on modernity, and on imperialism in the nineteenth century, was itself constructed, manipulated, and mobilised within the framework of purely "endogenous" debates—the dynamics pitting the centre against the provinces,

or orthodoxy against heterodoxy. He does not call for entirely abandoning these terms, but rather for a graduated approach that “disaggregates China horizontally and vertically,"[8] that is, which takes account of its geographical and social disparities. Is this stress on nuance, developed in the context of the nineteenth century, applicable to the twentieth? One hopes that this is what awaits the reader in a future edition of Origins of the Chinese Revolution, which in its present rejuvenated form will no doubt remain a reference work in the field for a long time to come.

NOTES

1. See Lucien Bianco, Origins of the Chinese revolution, 1915-1949, translated from the French by Muriel Bell, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1971 and several subsequent editions.
2. Regarding the personal background of Lucien Bianco, who frequented Pierre Bourdieu at Louis-le-Grand as well as Jacques Derrida in Algeria, it is worth reading “Un demi-siècle à l’écoute des bruits de la Chine," (Half a century of listening in on China), Le Monde des Livres, 14 October 2005.
3. To quote only one, Lucian Bianco offers the following remark on the biography of Mao by Jung Chang and Jon Halliday: “As Montaigne had it on imagination, this biography is ‘all the more treacherous as it does not deceive consistently'' (p. 504, note 29).
4. On a minor point, there perhaps needs to be greater relativisation of the signification of Hu Shi’s call for a “new" literature in vernacular language (p. 71 and p. 308). Vernacular was widely used in fiction since the Ming era, although it lacked the same moral authority that classical language enjoyed.
5. Wang Hui, Wudi panghuang: “Wusi" jiqi huisheng [Wandering Nowhere: May 4th and its echoes], Hangzhou, Zhejiang wenyi chubanshe, 1994, and Fankang juewang: Lu Xun jiqi wenxue shijie [Resisting despair: Lu Xun and his literary world], Shijiazhuang, Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2000.
6. Lucien Bianco, with Hua Chang-ming, Jacqueries et révolution dans la Chine du XXe siècle, Paris, La Martinière, 2005 (a reworking of the prior English edition Peasants without the party: Grass-root movements in twentieth century China, Armonk – London, ME Sharpe, 2001). See also book reviews by Alain Roux in China Perspectives, n°64 (March- April 2006), pp.60-64; and by Ramon H. Myers in China Quarterly n° 187 (September 2006), pp. 788-790.
7. Paul Cohen, Discovering History in China: American Historical Writing on the Recent Chinese Past, New York, Columbia University Press, 1984.
8. Ibid., p. 186